

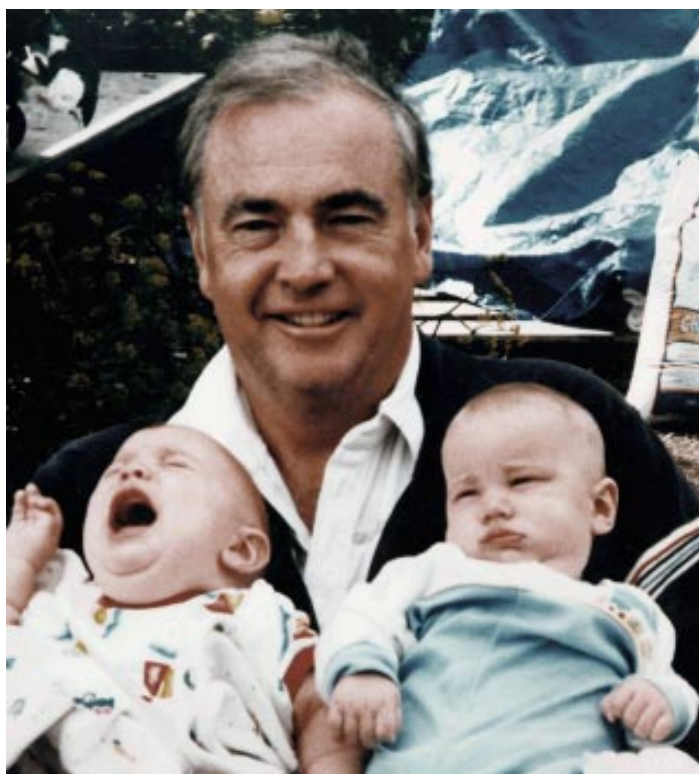
# Alaska Health Care News

*From the Office of Senator Frank H. Murkowski*  
Summer 1999

## Murkowski Introduces Comprehensive Rural Health Care Legislation

Senator Murkowski recently joined with other rural Senators to introduce S. 980, the Promoting Health in Rural Areas Act of 1999. This legislation seeks to make sweeping changes to health care laws which impact rural states. Included in S. 980 is the text of the rural initiatives already introduced this year by Senator Murkowski as separate bills. For a description of these bills, please see the articles on the Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 1999 (S. 406), the Graduate Medical Education Technical Amendments Act of 1999 (S. 541) and the Comprehensive Telehealth Act of 1999 (S. 770).

This legislation also requires Medicare to increase payments to rural hospitals by making it easier for those hospitals to qualify for special funding designations. Furthermore, the bill requires that rural areas be given representation on the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission; a provision to ensure that rural areas will always receive consideration in any Medicare changes.



## Senate Seeks to Provide Work Incentives for Disabled

On June 16, 1999, the Senate unanimously passed S. 331, the Work Incentives Improvement Act. This legislation is intended to provide incentives to work for persons with disabilities.

"In this era of welfare reform, we clearly need to help Americans prepare for and gain jobs. That is doubly important for those with disabilities. Our goal is to help expand the availability of health care services for those with disabilities," Murkowski said.

The bill is designed to eliminate work disincentives, provide extra vocational rehabilitation training for the disabled and create planning, assistance and outreach programs for those in need of training.

**United States Senate**  
Washington, D.C. 20510

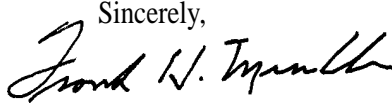
May 21, 1999

Dear Fellow Alaskan:

I continue to remain dedicated to improving the quality of health care in Alaska. During the coming months of the 106th Congress, I will remain committed to using my position as a member of the Senate Finance Committee, the Veterans' Affairs Committee and as the senior member of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs to advance issues important to all Alaskans.

However, I need to hear from you. Your comments and firsthand experiences are extremely helpful in my efforts to explain the uniqueness and difficulties associated with health care in Alaska.

The advice and suggestions of the Alaska health care community have been an important resource for me. Through continued cooperation, we can ensure that current and future generations of Alaskans will receive the best possible health care.

Sincerely,  
  
Frank H. Murkowski  
United States Senator

## Murkowski Seeks to Increase Medicare Reimbursement for Telemedicine

In an effort to extend high quality health care into rural areas, Senator Murkowski introduced S. 770, the Comprehensive Telehealth Act of 1999. This bill would expand the scope of telemedicine services for which Medicare will reimburse.

S. 770 would expand the services for which Medicare reimburses to include telemedicine consultations conducted over computer e-mail as well as other "store and forward" methods. Additionally, the bill establishes that psychologists and physical, occupational and speech therapists may also receive reimbursement for telemedicine consultations.

"Telemedicine already has proven it is the cost-effective and practical answer to the Alaska dilemma of how to provide modern health care in a vast geographical area. This bill should unravel the redtape that has prevented federal dollars from going to help fund the expansion of telemedicine in rural Alaska," said Murkowski.

In 1997, Senator Murkowski included amendments to the Balanced Budget Act that required Medicare to reimburse clinics and hospitals who use telemedicine services to diagnose and treat patients. Unfortunately HCFA subsequently imposed rules which have limited the types of services for which providers may receive reimbursement.

The text of this legislation is also included in S. 980, the Promoting Health in Rural Areas Act of 1999, recently introduced by Senator Murkowski and other rural Senators.

# Senator Murkowski Introduces IHS Direct Reimbursement Bill

Once again, Senator Murkowski has introduced legislation aimed at expanding and permanently extending the Medicare/Medicaid direct reimbursement demonstration project currently benefiting two Indian Health Service facilities in Alaska. In late 1998, Congress extended the demonstration for an additional three years.

“This bill, S. 406, should really help Native health facilities by providing badly needed revenues promptly rather than forcing the health care providers to go through the maze of regulations mandated by IHS. It should significantly reduce turn-around time between billing and receipt of payments and increase the administrative efficiency of Native medical facilities,” said Murkowski.

Currently, the Bristol Bay Health Corporation in Dillingham and the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Corporation in Sitka are the two Alaska facilities participating in the demonstration. Each has reported that the program has increased their reimbursements and decreased the time it takes to be reimbursed by nearly six months.

This legislation is also included in S. 980, the Promoting Health in Rural Areas Act of 1999.



Senator Murkowski is joined by Senators Specter, Akaka and Nickles at a press conference to raise awareness about the dangers of inhalants.

# Senate Passes Murkowski Inhalant Abuse Legislation

The Senate recently approved Senator Murkowski’s legislation aimed at providing more funding for inhalant abuse prevention programs. The bill, S. 609, was unanimously approved and will require that grants provided to schools under the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act be provided to schools who wish to conduct inhalant abuse prevention programs.

Currently, the law provides \$566 million per year in grant money to schools and organizations dedicated to fighting the abuse of illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco. S. 609 opens this funding up to inhalant abuse as well. Alaska is eligible for up to \$2.2 million a year for prevention efforts.

“Inhaling has a higher risk of ‘instant death’ than any other abused substance. One in five students have tried inhalants by the time they reach eighth grade and the numbers are rising. The use of inhalants by children has nearly doubled in the past decade (a 111 percent increase from 1991 to 1996 alone). Inhalants are the third most abused substance among teenagers behind only alcohol and tobacco. It only makes sense for inhalants to be included among the drugs that the federal government provides funds to prevent,” said Murkowski.

Last year Murkowski launched an effort to focus greater attention on the dangers of inhalant abuse among young children.

# Medical Records Privacy Bill Introduced

Senator Murkowski recently introduced S. 881, the Medical Information Protection Act of 1999. This bill will safeguard personal medical records, ensure patient access to records, penalize the wrongful disclosure of medical records and protect legitimate health care operations and research.

“Our health histories represent the most personal and private information about our lives. We need to protect these records, while at the same time making it possible for modern health care systems to help patients receive good and timely care. This bill strikes the appropriate balance,” said Murkowski.

The proposed law grows out of concerns that researchers and insurance companies may be improperly breaching the confidentiality of patients’ medical records. These concerns are heightened as more and more medical information is computerized.

Murkowski was joined by Senators Bob Bennett of Utah and Connie Mack of Florida in introducing this bill.

# New Legislation to Increase Medicare Reimbursement for Graduate Medical Education

Senator Murkowski, joined by Senator Susan Collins of Maine, introduced the Graduate Medical Education Technical Amendments Act of 1999 (S. 541). This bill is similar to legislation which Murkowski introduced last year to make legislative fixes to the Balanced Budget Act of 1997.

“Congress’ goal in reforming Medicare’s graduate medical education program was to slow down our nation’s overproduction of physicians, while still protecting the training of physicians who are in short supply in underserved rural areas. We clearly need to make some changes to protect the flow of family practice doctors into rural areas, like Alaska,” said Murkowski.

The 1997 Balanced Budget Act placed a cap on the number of doctors at specified medical institutions which could get graduate training in family practice medicine. The cap, however, did not take into account that training numbers may have been artificially low in 1996 at specific institutions because doctors had been training in remote-site programs. The new bill solves the problem by changing the cap to reflect the number of doctor “slots” in all training programs at institutions in 1996.

The text of S. 541 is also included in S. 980, the Promoting Health in Rural Areas Act of 1999.

**Please let me know what you are  
thinking.**

**Senator Frank H. Murkowski  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510  
(202) 224 - 6665**

**or via the Internet:**

**<http://murkowski.senate.gov>**